



Submission

Voluntary and Community Sector Infrastructure Support Consultation

January 2024

homelessconnect.org

Homeless Connect Response to the Voluntary and Community Sector Infrastructure Support Framework Consultation

Introduction

Homeless Connect has been working to prevent and alleviate homelessness in Northern Ireland since 1983. As a membership body, we represent organisations working with people experiencing homelessness or at risk of becoming homeless and provide direct support to service users through our projects.¹

Are you responding as an individual or on behalf of an organisation?

This response is made on behalf of Homeless Connect as an organisation. We welcome the opportunity to respond to this consultation.

Question 2

What is the name of your organisation?

Homeless Connect

Question 3

Does your organisation operate more in urban or rural areas?

- a. More urban
- ~~b. More rural~~
- ~~c. Evenly split~~

Question 4

Which of the following best describes your organisation?

- a. Voluntary and Community Sector organisation
- ~~b. Public Sector organisation~~

- ~~c. Private Sector organisation~~
- ~~d. Funder~~

Question 5

If you are answering on behalf of a voluntary and community organisation, which of the following best describes it?

- ~~a. Voluntary organisation~~
- b. Community organisation
- ~~c. Social Enterprise~~
- ~~d. Other~~

Question 6

The Joint Forum has proposed a draft framework of values and practices as a foundation for a future Concordat. To what extent do you agree with these values and practices as a way of supporting the relationship between Government and the Voluntary and Community Sector?

	Strong Agree	Agree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Value 1: Accountability		X			
Value 2: Active Participation		X			
Value 3: Social Justice		X			
Value 4: Independence		X			
Value 5: Collaboration		X			
Value 6: Sustainability		X			

Please share anything you would like add specific to each of the individual values:

We agree with all six values set out in the draft framework and the accompanying ways of working outlined. It is evident that these values and ways of working have been carefully considered by the Department through its consultation process thus far. This is to the credit of the Department.

One minor amendment which we would suggest would be to explicitly mention consultation processes in the section on accountability. Considering the importance of consultation processes to good government, it may be helpful to explicitly refer to them in this section.

The challenge as we see it is not the values or ways of working outlined which are well constructed and thought out. The challenge will be in the operational delivery of these values and ways of working in practice. As the consultation documents rightly acknowledge in terms of evidence already taken, “the current funding climate and operating conditions are very challenging.”² As the Department is aware, the homelessness sector is facing enormous challenges at the current time which have been long in the making. If these values and their associated ways of working are to be meaningfully implemented with regard to the homelessness sector, the challenges around funding and operating conditions will have to be addressed.

With that noted, however, it is still appropriate and timely for the Department to put forward the right values and ways of working to aspire to.

Question 7

Please let us know if you think there are gaps in the proposed framework of values and practices or anything additional that you would like to see included

We have no further comment to make.

Question 8

The Joint Forum has been considering options to ensure that a future Concordat/agreement leads to meaningful change and an improved relationship between the sectors. To what extent do you agree that a future Concordat/agreement would be strengthened if a legal duty were created to require NI Executive Ministers to act in compliance with the concordat values and practices when making decisions and carrying out ministerial responsibilities?

~~Strongly Agree / Agree / Neither Agree nor Disagree / Disagree / Strongly Disagree~~

Question 9

The Joint Forum is keen to hear views on what the ambition and scope of a new Concordat/agreement should be between Government and the Voluntary and Community Sector.

Please share any thoughts, ideas or challenges below:

Firstly, a note on the language used here. In the estimation of Homeless Connect, it would be preferable if the language of “agreement” was used in place of “concordat.” The term “concordat” is not commonly used by most people living in NI and is liable to be misunderstood or be the subject

of confusion. In our view, the language of agreement is preferable and is likely to be better understood.

We agree that it would be a useful step if a legal duty were created to require NI Executive Ministers to act in accordance with agreement values and practices when making decisions and carrying out ministerial responsibilities. As the Department will know, much would depend on the precise detail of what such a duty would entail; what mechanisms are available to enforce the duty; and how organisations in the voluntary and community sector would be able to make use of it.

The original 2011 “Concordat between the Voluntary & Community Sector and the Northern Ireland Government” was a welcome and positive development when it was introduced.³ The document cogently set out the values and principles which need to underpin the relationship between the VCS and the Northern Ireland Government. It further included a list of indicative commitments. As with any document of this nature, it is right and appropriate to review and amend documents of this nature in line with wider developments in society. Consequently, we very much welcome this consultation exercise.

In terms of the scope and ambition of a new agreement between Government and the VCS, we believe that the agreement should look to be wide-ranging with clear oversight and accountability mechanisms. We would submit that any new agreement should focus more on the processes of driving forward better relationships and outcomes rather than the principles underpinning it. The principles outlined in the 2011 concordat and in this consultation are solid. To use an analogy, they are a sound foundation to build on. To continue the analogy, the emphasis in the agreement needs to be more on the house the VCS and NI Executive Departments are seeking to build together on the basis of the principles outlined. This requires focused attention on the processes and mechanisms which will drive forward meaningful change and help both the VCS and Government here to act in a mutually beneficial way.

From our perspective as the representative body for the homelessness sector, we have constructive and positive relationships with representatives of several Executive departments and statutory bodies. However, we and our members have at times found working practices in working with statutory partners to be challenging at points. Some examples may help to illustrate the kind of issues we believe a future agreement would need to address in a concrete way.

Firstly, we would highlight the occasional practice of statutory departments variably applying deadlines. We have found that on some occasions, statutory agencies and Executive Departments have applied hard deadlines (for example in funding applications) on often underfunded and small organisations in our sector while consistently extending deadlines and timelines for delivery on their own part. This generates frustration on the part of the organisations impacted and is not in line with the vision of mutual co-operation desired between the VCS and Government here.

Secondly, we would point to the variable quality of consultations conducted by Executive departments and statutory agencies. Some consultations have been conducted in a constructive and positive way delivering good outcomes. Some notable examples of good consultation processes we

have been involved in would include the consultation conducted by the Housing Executive on the 2022-2027 Homelessness Strategy and the consultation conducted by the Department for Communities on the Housing Supply Strategy.⁴ However, unfortunately not all consultations reach the same high standards. We have had experience of some consultations being rushed; lacking in important details; or can at least be perceived to be cosmetic, box-ticking exercises when a decision has in fact already been taken before the consultation is launched.

On some occasions, rushed consultations are the product of external circumstances flowing from the political dysfunction which has marked Northern Ireland's governance in recent years. However, we would query attempts to suggest that this is the only factor leading to some of the more problematic practices we have seen. Additionally, a consistent issue which can arise is the failure to provide enough information within consultation documents to fully understand the rationale behind proposals as well as failing to provide the section 75 data needed to assess equality impacts. Recent examples of consultations where these issues at least arguably arose were in relation to the EQIAs around the budget for 2023/4 conducted by several Executive Departments.

At the current time, there does not appear to be any meaningful accountability mechanism in place for VCS organisations to raise concerns about the quality of consultation exercises. It is true that informally issues can be raised and sometimes this may generate positive results. However, such an option is not always available and a mechanism through which to raise concerns about consultation exercises would be helpful.

Thirdly, we would also highlight the fact that there can be a gap between the rhetoric used and the practice employed. A good example here is around the importance of listening to people with lived experience of homelessness. Rhetorically, there has been a notable and highly welcome shift on the part of several statutory bodies and Executive Departments to recognising the value and importance of hearing from people with lived experience of homelessness. Some changes to working practices have accompanied the rhetorical shift.

However, the resources to make this shift concrete and meaningful have not been forthcoming up to now. It is noted that there have been efforts to procure funding in this direction, which we very much appreciate. However, we would caution that it is important to ensure that the rhetoric and the accompanying practices employed align as much as possible. It is a recipe for cynicism and disengagement to promise something and then under-deliver. This equally applies to organisations in the VCS as well as to Government.

While these issues may seem technical or procedural in nature, difficulties in these areas can flow out to have much wider impacts on the VCS and on Government delivery. We would submit that any new agreement should pay close attention to the procedural aspects of the relationship between the VCS and Government and seek specific mechanisms to drive forward positive change.

Question 10

10. The 2011 Concordat was framed as an agreement between Government and the voluntary and community sector. The Joint Forum believes that a future Concordat should apply to a wider range of “civil society” organisations: a very broad definition that includes everything outside the state (public sector) and the market (private sector). This is also sometimes called the “third sector” or the “social sector”. There is some debate around the term we should use when we speak about this broader sector. Which would be your preferred term?

~~Third sector / Social sector / Civil Society / Other / No preference~~

If Other, please specify below:

Homeless Connect does not have a strong preference on this question. In our own language, we would tend to talk about the VCS. We would be cautious about using the term “civil society” due to the sheer breadth that this term can be held to encompass. There is a risk in going so wide that boundaries can be blurred. However, we would certainly be open to understanding the desire for this language to be utilised.

Vision

“A confident, independent and collaborative sector which empowers and sustains local action and volunteering; a sector that represents the diversity of our communities and supports the delivery of inclusive and accessible services and programme for government outcomes through partnership, innovation and challenge”

Question 11

The draft framework proposes a vision for infrastructure support. To what extent do you agree with this vision?

~~Strongly Agree / Agree / Neither Agree nor Disagree / Disagree / Strongly Disagree~~

If you would like to expand on your answer please do so below:

We believe this is a well thought out vision which captures the key elements of what is needed.

Question 12

To what extent do you agree with this Leadership and Advocacy headline outcome?

~~Strongly Agree / Agree / Neither Agree nor Disagree / Disagree / Strongly Disagree~~

Question 13

To what extent do you agree with the supporting outcomes?

	Strong Agree	Agree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Sector leaders have skills and confidence to support their organisations and communities		X			
Sector leaders work together around shared issues		X			
Sector leadership is diverse and representative of the sector and communities		X			
Data and evidence from the sector is effectively collated, analysed and communicated		X			
Public policy and decision making (central and local government) is informed by evidence from the sector		X			

Question 14

If you would like to expand on your answer please do so below:

These are welcome supporting outcomes which we agree with.

Question 15

To what extent do you agree with this Volunteering headline outcome?

~~Strongly Agree / Agree / Neither Agree nor Disagree / Disagree / Strongly Disagree~~

Question 16

To what extent do you agree with the supporting outcomes?

	Strong Agree	Agree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
People volunteering with organisations are well supported and valued		X			
Voluntary management committees can access the support they need		X			
The value and impact of volunteering is understood and communicated		X			
Organisations in the sector are supported to recruit and manage volunteers		X			
Volunteer management skills are developed within organisations		X			
Volunteer opportunities are accessible		X			
People volunteering are representative of our diverse communities		X			

Question 17

If you would like to expand on your answer please do so below:

As an organisation which involves a wide range of volunteers in our FareShare NI and Starter Pack projects, we believe these are sound supporting outcomes.

Question 18

To what extent do you agree with this Core Capacity and Resilience headline outcome?

~~Strongly Agree / Agree / Neither Agree nor Disagree / Disagree / Strongly Disagree~~

	Strong Agree	Agree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Voluntary and community organisations can access a range of support which meets diverse needs		X			
Organisations are supported to work effectively within a changing funding and regulatory framework		X			
Organisations are supported to demonstrate the impact of their work		X			
Organisations are supported to access funding and diversify income		X			
Organisations are supported to acquire, develop and sustain assets		X			

Question 19

If you would like to expand on your answer please do so below:

In this section, we would make two suggestions. Firstly, we would submit that some consideration should be given to challenges in the recruitment of staff in the VCS. The homelessness sector has been for several years in the midst of a recruitment as well as a retention crisis. It is very difficult to maintain core capacity and resilience without being able to recruit the staff you need. We would point to three recommendations outlined in research we commissioned in 2022 on Staffing Challenges in the Homelessness sector in this regard:

- “Professionalise the sector, and consider the training pathways and professional development of staff employed;
- Dedicate activity to enhance staffing levels across the sector, with targeted recruitment activity (facilitated with improved Ts & Cs);
- Improve PR and communication to better explain to future employees (and the broader society more generally) what a role in the homelessness sector actually entails”⁵

Secondly, we would further submit that cognisance should be given to the importance of maintaining staff wellbeing in upholding core capacity and resilience. Working in the homelessness sector, while in many cases rewarding, can be enormously challenging. Some frontline staff can literally be faced with life and death situations around the use of substances and self-harm. The staffing challenges in the homelessness sector research made the following recommendations in this area:

- “Adequate sick leave so that staff can properly recuperate from any illness encountered whilst working in the sector;
- Enhanced holiday entitlement to allow staff to better look after their own mental health and wellbeing with much needed downtime and rest;
- Freely available and professional mental health support for all staff who require such services;
- Opportunities to further strengthen the existing strong staff relationships and support networks, e.g., via funded staff away days and wellbeing events”⁶

Question 21

To what extent do you agree with this Collaboration and Partnership headline outcome?

Strongly Agree / Agree / Neither Agree nor Disagree / Disagree / Strongly Disagree

Question 22

To what extent do you agree with the supporting outcomes?

	Strong Agree	Agree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Sector infrastructure convenes diverse and representative partnerships and networks		X			
Sector-led partnerships support effective engagement with government		X			
Sector-led partnerships support local resilience and civil contingencies arrangements		X			
Collaboration and partnership enable peer support and sharing of knowledge, skills and competence		X			
Collaboration and partnerships support organisations to sustain services and improve their impact		X			

Question 23

If you would like to expand on your answer please do so below:

We very much agree with this headline outcome and all of the supporting outcomes.

Question 24

Are there any key elements or themes missing from either the vision or headline outcomes?

No

If yes, please provide further information:

Question 25

The Department has suggested five key areas for delivery against the proposed outcomes. To what extent do you agree that focusing on these delivery areas will support the outcomes framework?

~~Strongly Agree / Agree / Neither Agree nor Disagree / Disagree / Strongly Disagree~~

If you would like to expand on your answer please do so below. Note that additional sections of this survey will allow space for more comments on the detail of these delivery areas.

We believe these five key areas are suitable in terms of delivering outcomes if they are backed up by effective accountability mechanisms.

Question 26

To what extent do you agree with the proposed approach to delivering regional infrastructure support?

~~Strongly Agree / Agree / Neither Agree nor Disagree / Disagree / Strongly Disagree~~

Question 27

To what extent do you agree with the need for 3 types of local infrastructure support:

	Strong Agree	Agree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Community infrastructure organisations (sub-regional)		X			
Community infrastructure organisations (sub-sectoral)		X			
Volunteer centres		X			

Question 28

Creating effective partnerships

In summary, this delivery area commits to:

- Create new range of partnerships with sector infrastructure organisations to support delivery against the outcomes framework.

- Redesign the Community Support Programme in partnership with local government.

To what extent do you agree with these commitments?

~~Strongly Agree / Agree / Neither Agree nor Disagree / Disagree / Strongly Disagree~~

If you would like to expand on your answer please do so below:

We would contend that we are the natural Community Infrastructure Organisation (sub-sectoral) for the homelessness sector in NI. We already have good connections and links with the Department for Communities and the Housing Executive and are in a position to, with the right resources, assist in the delivery of the goals outlined in the consultation document in this section. We would like to be involved in the co-design process referred to on p21 of the consultation document on behalf of the homelessness sector.

Question 29

To what extent do you agree with these priorities for investment under the leadership and advocacy headline outcome?

~~Strongly Agree / Agree / Neither Agree nor Disagree / Disagree / Strongly Disagree~~

Question 30

Can you suggest any other priorities?

We would suggest reference to supporting people with lived experience to become leaders and advocates be included in the list of priorities.

Question 31

To what extent do you agree with these priorities for investment under the volunteering headline outcome?

~~Strongly Agree / Agree / Neither Agree nor Disagree / Disagree / Strongly Disagree~~

Question 32

Can you suggest any other priorities?

As an organisation with a strong volunteer programme within our FareShare project, we would suggest an additional priority of sharing good practice in working with and managing volunteers across the VCS.

Question 33

To what extent do you agree with these priorities for investment under the core capacity and resilience headline outcome?

~~Strongly Agree / Agree / Neither Agree nor Disagree / Disagree / Strongly Disagree~~

Question 34

Can you suggest any other priorities?

In line with our suggestions above, we would submit that a priority should be included related to staff wellbeing in the VCS. At least in the homelessness sector, we know that this is a significant challenge and feel it should be included as a priority.

Question 35

To what extent do you agree with these priorities for investment under the collaboration and partnership headline outcome?

~~Strongly Agree / Agree / Neither Agree nor Disagree / Disagree / Strongly Disagree~~

Question 36

Can you suggest any other priorities?

We are content with the priorities outlined.

Question 37

Sustained investment in sector infrastructure: commissioning an integrated framework of support geared towards a common outcomes framework.

In summary, this delivery area commits to:

- Renew investment in sector infrastructure supports

To what extent do you agree with this commitment?

~~Strongly Agree / Agree / Neither Agree nor Disagree / Disagree / Strongly Disagree~~

Question 38

To what extent do you agree that improving charity regulation will support positive outcomes for the sector?

~~Strongly Agree / Agree / Neither Agree nor Disagree / Disagree / Strongly Disagree~~

If you would like to expand on your answer please do so below:

Naturally we at Homeless Connect believe it is important to improve charity regulation. Effective and proportionate regulation of the VCS is vitally important. The reform process needs to give due cognisance to the impact changes may have on smaller charities and ensure that support is available to organisations if they are impacted by reform.

Question 39

In summary, this delivery area commits to:

- Support strategic relationships with government and non-government funders
- Apply and champion fair and improved funding practices

To what extent do you agree with these commitments?

~~Strongly Agree / Agree / Neither Agree nor Disagree / Disagree / Strongly Disagree~~

If you would like to expand on your answer please do so below:

Any measures which would serve to streamline and improve funding practices would be welcomed by organisations in the homelessness sector.

In summary, this delivery area commits to:

- Boost data on the VCS
- Improve understanding of the VCS

Question 40

To what extent do you agree with these commitments?

~~Strongly Agree / Agree / Neither Agree nor Disagree / Disagree / Strongly Disagree~~

If you would like to expand on your answer please do so below:

We agree that these are positive commitments.

Mark Baillie | Policy and Public Affairs Manager | mark.baillie@homelessconnect.org | 028 90246440

References

¹ 'Homeless Connect' is a registered charity in Northern Ireland (charity number 103325)

² Department for Communities, "Voluntary and Community Sector Infrastructure Support Framework, Draft Framework: Proposals for Consultation Annex 2, November 2023, accessed 14 December 2023, <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/consultations/communities/dfc-voluntary-community-sector-infrastructure-support-framework-consultation-annex2.pdf>

³ Department for Communities, "Concordat between the Voluntary & Community Sector and the Northern Ireland Government", 6 September 2011, <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/dsd/consultation-concordat-for-relationships-between-govt-vc-sector.pdf>.

⁴ Housing Executive, "Homelessness Strategy" <https://www.nihe.gov.uk/housing-help/homelessness/homelessness-strategy>, accessed 13 December 2023 and Department for Communities "Housing Supply Strategy", <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/articles/new-housing-supply-strategy>, accessed 13 December 2023.

⁵ Dr Karen Orr and Dr Leanne O'Hara, "Staffing Challenges within the Northern Ireland Homelessness Sector," September 2022, accessed 13 December 2023, <https://homelessconnect.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/HOMELESS-CONNECT-STAFFING-RESEARCH-REPORT-SEPT-22.pdf> p83.

⁶ Orr and O'Hara, "Staffing Challenges", p84.



Homeless Connect

Mallusk Road | Central Park Building 14 | BT36 4FS

homelessconnect.org